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VIII.—ON THE LIFE AND LABOURS OF THE LATE JOHN D'ALTON, Esq.
By Mr. J. R. O'FLANAGAN.

[Read February 25, 1867.]

THE death of the late Mr. D'Alton, who justly ranked among the most eminent Irish historians of our day, and who obtained distinguished honours from the Royal Irish Academy in bygone years, has already been mentioned in suitable language by our President. As I had the honour and advantage of being linked to him by ties of intimate friendship for a quarter of a century, and, as I was well acquainted with the nature and extent of his literary labours, it occurred to me that I might do some service to his memory, and to the Academy, by bringing those labours before the members somewhat in detail.

The late John D'Alton was born at Bessville, county of Westmeath, the seat of his father, William D'Alton, Esq., on the 29th of June, 1792. His mother, also of highly respectable family, was named Elizabeth Leyne. He was educated in Dublin, whither he was sent, in his ninth year, to the school of the Rev. Joseph Hutton, on Summer-hill, not far from the abode in which he passed his life; and, as an early indication of his devotion to the labour of many a year, the work he selected as his first premium, won at the age of ten, was Leland's "History of Ireland." He continued at the school of Mr. Hutton until ready to enter College, which he did in his fourteenth year, in July, 1806. He was an excellent classical scholar, and, even at this early age, gave indications of those literary tastes which clung to him during his lifetime.

Mr. D'Alton, in the year 1808, was elected a member of a society which, for now close upon a hundred years, has been the cradle wherein Irish eloquence has been rocked into a vigorous and steady maturity—the College Historical Society.

Mr. D'Alton early signalized himself, and his success was not evanescent. His step was always in the arena, his shield always hung on the lists; and for, I may venture to say, the whole of his years of membership, he successively was awarded the prizes for Poetry in the College Historical Society.

In May, 1811, he commenced the study of a profession which is, with no good reason, supposed antagonistic to poetry—the law. We had no later than our last night of meeting a signal proof of the co-existence of the most profound and exact professional erudition in the mind of one whose poetry infuses delight wherever the English language is known; and the Regius Professor of Civil Law in the University of Dublin is certainly more widely known as the exquisite translator of "Faust." Mr. D'Alton was a student of the Middle Temple, London, and our King's Inns, and, having duly kept his terms, was called to the Irish Bar in 1813.

The course of his professional career does not warrant me occupying your time. He published a "Treatise on the Law of Tithes," went

the Connaught Circuit, and had extensive practice in cases wherein questions of title and pedigree had to be traced. He was retained in the well-known cases of *Malone v. O'Connor*, *Leany v. Smith*, *Jago v. Hungerford*, and others of that class. In 1834 he was appointed by Government a Commissioner of the Loan Fund Board, and this is all I deem it necessary to mention in reference to Mr. D'Alton's professional career.

Mr. D'Alton's first production as an author was a poem of an ambitious character, entitled, "*Dermid, or Erin in the Days of Boru*," published in 1814. This bold attempt at fame, considering his success while a member of the College Historical Society, was perhaps quite natural. The literary taste of the age was poetry. The pulse of the empire was quickened by the Peninsular War, and the exciting measure of the inspired bard was more in unison with the prevailing temper of the nation than tamer productions in prose. The demand was promptly met. Never did more glorious stars shine in the poetical firmament—Byron and Shelley, Coleridge and Southey, Wordsworth and Crabbe, Campbell and Moore were enriching, in prodigal profusion, the libraries with every species of poetical composition. Our National Bard had already gained such renown, that, before a line of a poem he meditated was composed, a London publisher—Longman—agreed to pay him for it 3000 guineas. Then, amidst the snows of a winter in Derbyshire, Moore was weaving the gorgeous tissue of "*Lalla Rookh*," and by the light of his own brilliant imagination conjuring up those sunny scenes of the Orient, which were afterwards welcomed in India as indigenous to its clime. In Caledonia, a Scott by name and Scot by nature—loving intensely the rugged land of his birth, well read in her traditions—conceived the high and generous purpose of displaying patriotism in song. We know the result. The hills and dales, the lochs and mountains of Scotland have become familiar in our homes as household words; and "*The Lady of the Lake*," "*Marmion*," "*The Lord of the Isles*," and "*The Lay of the Last Minstrel*," rendered their author famous before the wonderful tide of his novels, which in later years almost rivalled wave following wave of the sea, had commenced to flow. The success of Walter Scott aroused the ambition of John D'Alton; he felt that Ireland had many interesting epochs in her history, which afforded subjects for the muse; he considered the lakes and rivers, the hills and dales of Erin in no way inferior in scenic beauty to these which the genius of Scott had invested with another charm; and thus it was that Mr. D'Alton composed his metrical poem—"Dermid, or the Days of Boru."

It is of the quarto size, then deemed the orthodox size in poetry, and divided into twelve cantos. "The period of the following romance," he informs us, "is that interesting epoch in the history of Ireland, when Danish oppression was driven from that country by the check which it received in the memorable battle of Clontarf." He paid particular attention to preserve faithful descriptions of the manners and customs of the time; and, while historic truth was adhered to,

the plot was designed to present the most picturesque scenery of Ireland. The Festivals of the Church mark the time of each canto—twelve in number; while the Danes, not being entirely converted to Christianity, afforded him the opportunity of describing the rites of Odin, and other deities of Scandinavian mythology.

Although I had marked many passages for extracting, time only allows me to select one. It describes scenery familiar, I am sure, to most of my hearers, and therefore the general fidelity of the descriptive passages can be fairly tested—*Ex uno disce omnes*.

Dermid, having escaped to the Wicklow coast from captivity in the Isle of Man, meets with a widowed lady on St. Patrick's Day, who gives him much-needed sustenance:—

“ While Eveleen, with humble food,
Refreshed him in her solitude,
Often his wistful eye would steal
Along the windings of the vale,
Where, girt by many a mountain grey,
Rolled in itself unsociably,
The valley of the lakes displayed
Its shrines, embrowned in thickest shade
Of circling mountains, that appeared,
With rude stupendous height, to guard
This hallowed region of repose.
Here in dark horror Lugduff rose —
The southern sentinel—beside
Towered Derrybawn, in waving pride;
Between them, o'er its rocky bed,
By woods embrowned, a torrent sped;
While with contrasted brightness fell
From hills, that westward bound the vale,
Glaneola's cascade; and, north,
Broccagh his mountain mists sent forth;
But in the east no envious height
Shut out the golden flood of light;
No interposing forest stood
To veil the rising orb—that rode
Full in the breach—e'en now, as fate
Had placed it there a golden gate,
To guard and gild this sacred ground;
While, brightly arched o'er all, and wound
About the mountains' tops, the sky
Closed up the enchanted scenery.”

This poem won a hearty tribute of praise from Scott, and was not unknown to Moore and Byron.

A few years after the publication of his poem, Mr. D'Alton married Miss Phillips—a lady of good family, whose amiable disposition and domestic virtues constituted the chief charms of his hospitable home for the greater part of his life.

In 1827, the Royal Irish Academy, desirous of directing attention to the too much neglected history of Ireland, offered a prize of £80 for the best essay on the social and political state of the people of Ireland,

from the commencement of the Christian era to the twelfth century; their advancement or retrogression in science, literature, and the arts; and the character of their moral and religious opinions, as connected with their civil and ecclesiastical institutions, so far as they could be gleaned from any original writings prior to the commencement of the sixteenth century, exclusive of those in the Irish or other Celtic languages, as such documents might on a future occasion be proposed by the Academy as a subject for investigation. Every statement was required to be supported, not by reference only, but by extracts, in the form of notes or an appendix; and it was expected that every accessible source of information should be examined, under the above limitation. Besides the sum of money, the Cunningham Gold Medal was to be given for the best essay, and additional premiums awarded to others possessing less positive merit. Mr. D'Alton's essay obtained the highest prize, with the Gold Medal; and to Thomas Carroll, M.D., was awarded £40 for his essay on the same subject. Mr. D'Alton's essay, which was read 24th November, 1828, occupies nearly the entire of the first part of vol. xvi. of the "Transactions of the Royal Irish Academy."

In the year 1831, he again entered the lists for the prize offered by this Academy for an "Account of the Reign of Henry II. in Ireland," and was again victorious.

Thenceforth he earnestly set to work, collecting all that was written, and within reach of his busy pen, about Druidical stones, the earth works of early colonists, the fortresses of the Anglo-Norman invaders, the stately towers of the Plantagenets, the more habitable and commodious dwellings of the Tudors' reigns, the stern and massive stone-built keeps of the Cromwellians. These he noted, and they formed materials for future use. The beautiful ruins of abbeys and other buildings devoted to religious purposes were carefully inspected, while his freedom of action was unimpeded by an infirmity which confined him very much to his room in after years.

In 1838 he published his "Memoirs of the Archbishops of Dublin." The concluding passage of this work is creditable to his memory, and characteristic of his disposition:—"The course of the author's life has been studiously removed from party excitements and unholy bigotries; and he fondly indulges the hope he may live to see the day when, on their utter extinction, peace, brotherly love, industry, and universal liberty, may smile upon his native land."

The same year, 1838, witnessed the publication of the "History of the County of Dublin."

A few years then elapsed—not idly spent, however; for in 1844 Mr. D'Alton published two illustrated volumes: "The History of Drogheda, with its Environs," and an "Introductory Memoir of the Dublin and Drogheda Railway." This introductory memoir gives a sketch of the progress of locomotion, the condition of the roads, vehicles, mails, and travelling in Ireland, from the earliest ages.

Shortly after the "History of Drogheda," appeared the "Annals

of Boyle." To aid the publication, he told me Lord Lorton contributed £300.

He was still amassing and arranging, when he was invited to print some record of the families indigenous to, or long naturalized in, Ireland. He found among his relics "King James the Second's Irish Army List," giving the names of the several other officers of the regiments in his service who were of families of the aristocracy of Ireland at that time. This was the nucleus of two large volumes, intituled, "Illustrations, Historical and Genealogical, of King James's Irish Army List, 1689," published in 1855. He mentions the very great kindness he received, when compiling this work, from our present Viceroy, the Marquis of Abercorn. It was about this period Her Majesty was pleased to assign him a small pension, as an acknowledgment of his literary merits.

In 1864 the "History of Dundalk" was published, under the joint names of Mr. D'Alton and myself; and in the preface he states the portions contributed by each.

Mr. D'Alton had great business qualities, as the order and methodical arrangement of his numerous works show. Having been associated with him in publication, I can testify to the care with which he revised the proofs, and the watchful attention he bestowed upon minute typographical details. He carried his notions of the naked truth in which history should appear, perhaps, too far. His dry narratives of facts are unrelieved by any picturesque description—not from his want of appreciating a pleasing style, but from his anxiety not to misrepresent, or conceal the course of events. Any attempt at what is termed fine writing, but more especially humour, he considered out of place, and unworthy the dignity of history. Latterly his infirmities confined him to his chair; but he loved the society of his friends, and was always gay and cheerful.

Mr. D'Alton was very entertaining—noted in convivial hours for his vocal power, and loved to narrate anecdotes of his youth, which he told with great humour. He never allowed his mind to rest. About a year or two since, our late President, accompanied by Sir Bernard Burke, called on him to examine his manuscripts. Mr. D'Alton showed them to his visitors. As no reference has since been made to him respecting them, I am not able to state whether they are likely to become public property, or not.

I have little more to add. The severe weather of last month terminated, on the 20th January, 1867, a career which counted seventy-four years. For some time lately Mr. D'Alton was diligently employed on his autobiography. From my knowledge of his kindness of heart, and happy social temperament, I feel sure his reminiscences of former years will be genial and pleasant. This work, I make bold to predict, will be a becoming termination to a life of labour—of toil not without use—and of success worthily won.